



# J.O. Training

*Saves Lives, Equipment and Careers*

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**T**en years ago I was conning an aircraft carrier during replenishment with an AOE. I recently had reported aboard as a second-tour division officer, had just completed my first session alongside, and was about to relinquish the conn to the breakaway conning officer.

Instead, I was told to keep the conn because I was going to conn the ship through the breakaway. I asked how a breakaway was done on a carrier since this would be my first time as a surface warfare lieutenant to conn such a large ship during a breakaway.

The conning officer coach recommended two degrees left rudder and all-ahead flank. I gave the order. During the next several minutes, the bridge team proved that vector logic and the venturi effect influenced 100,000 tons of carrier and fleet oiler just as they had affected ancient Greek galleys, thousands of years ago.

The slight rudder-angle change couldn't overcome the venturi affect between our two hulls, so the carrier's stern was sucked toward the oiler. It also took some time for the carrier's power plant to build up engine revolutions for acceleration, so our

forward speed was insufficient to overcome that suction.

We got so close to the oiler our stack camera was looking down on the AOE's flight deck, or so the under-instruction, engineering officer-of-the-watch would later tell me.

### Training Time Out!

During my first division officer tour, while operating in the North Atlantic, my commanding officer had used the quiet moments while alongside another ship to ask his bridge watchstanders what-if questions. His favorite was, "What do you do when a rogue wave in the North Atlantic shoves our stern towards the oiler?"

### Training Time In!

Coming back to the carrier: That North Atlantic training kicked in, and I began to incrementally change rudder angle: two degrees left, then one degree left, then amidships, then one degree right, ultimately up to eight degrees right.

The stern finally broke free and I slowly "walked" the rudder angle back to amidships and waited for the ship's speed to increase.

Once our forward speed overcame the venturi effect, we were able to add two degrees left rudder and smoothly break away from the AOE.

My captain—a future flag officer—had remained silent throughout the evolution. As he and I walked from the auxiliary conn back to his bridge chair, he commented that my recovery was the best he had ever seen, from a place he never again wanted to be.

What did I learn?  
Plenty.

**Plan, Brief, Then Execute:** If unexpectedly offered the opportunity to conn the ship during an UNREP breakaway,

wait and get the brief before you execute. Without a brief, decline the privilege and wait your turn. Plan and brief the operation, then execute as planned and briefed. If you have to change the operation, pause and then inform the whole team of the change.

**If It Doesn't Sound Right, It Isn't:** If a helm or rudder order doesn't sound right, stop and ask for clarification. I had participated in scores of UNREPs during the past three years and several deployments. Yet, I executed a senior commander's recommendation without giving it a second thought. Was I trying to impress my new command? Probably. Did I endanger lives? Probably. Did I recover? Yes, thanks to training from a previous CO.

**Train Your Junior Officers:** Finally, no matter how cold the North Atlantic or how hot the Arabian Gulf, a bridge watch-team leader must use those rare "quiet" UNREP moments to train up-and-coming conning officers. Between checking ships' forward and aft motions and lateral separation, those what-if scenarios should be addressed.

Such a discussion saved my career and probably several others, along with equipment worth millions of dollars and maybe some lives, as well. 🇺🇸



Navy photo by PH1 Spencer Layne